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ABSTRACT

Colleges and their surrounding communities have a supplier/consumer relationship--in exchange for the use of tax-exempt land and tax-supported services, the college acts as a cultural and educational center that provides the community with social and economic benefits. However, in times of a declining economy, this symbiotic relationship is not always understood. Community impact studies, therefore, should be used to supply data that help the community determine the net value of the presence of a college or university in the vicinity. A valuable resource for conducting these surveys is a book entitled, "Conducting Community College Impact Studies: A Handbook for Community Colleges," by Armijo, Micek, and Cooper. This work provides a complete how-to-do-it guide for assessing the economic, educational, social, and technological impacts of a college on a community, and provides recommendations for the definition of the environment to be studied, a description of the groups to be surveyed, and sample survey instruments. Impact studies also help a college determine community awareness and use of its programs, the extent to which it is meeting community needs, and the existence of unmet needs. Thus, community impact studies serve both to enhance college/community relationships and to provide data for future program planning. (JP)

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The Use of Community Impact Studies in a Declining Economy

Focus: How impact studies can be used for program planning and development

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Regardless of whether located in a rural, surburban on urban community, the presence of a college is a significant factor. Its impact is made in many ways in addition to the obvious teaching, research and public service functions. In the eye of the community the college may be a source of culture, irritation, entertainment, nusiance, pride, political agitation, low-cost labor, and revenue. But members of the community may also be aware of the fact that the college is a source of expense. It exists on tax-exempt land; children of staff and students attend public schools and use public facilities; the college benefits from tax-supported services such as fire and police protection, libraries, utilities, and street maintenance, and even some of the college's operations may compete with local business.

The community supplies its college with some income, a number of its students, in many cases its controlling board, some of its faculty and staff and many of its friends and critics. The community furnishes jobs for students and graduates of the institution. Many of the local citizens attend numerous events of public interest sponsored by the college.

In return, the college does many things for the community. It provides educational programs for young and old; it maintains a flow of technically trained personnel into business and industry; it provides pre-professional and in some cases professional training for men and women; it provides for community leadership in every conceivable kind of organization

and in government. By its mere presence, a college makes a city or town more attractive for those who may wish to locate there; it often provides considerable economic benefit to the community and it assists business and industry through research and provides in-service training for its personnel. It generally makes available to all the citizens an opportunity to enjoy recreational activities in sports, music, drama and art. And above all, it offers the community a cultural and educational focus. Hence, the impact of a college on its community has both positive and negative aspects. However, the net result of the college on the community should be one of mutual benefit. An educational institution is seen both as a supplier and consumer of goods and services, and in most places this "supplier-consumer" relationship is not clearly understood.

Why undertake a community impact study?

There was a time when many institutions of higher learning were considered "ivory towers" within their surrounding communities. Oftentimes the college and the community were separated by feelings of hostility on the one side, and aloofness on the other. Fortunately, with the growth of higher education's importance to society this relationship, in most places, has undergone a significant change. However, there still exists misunderstandings of the relationship between the college and the surrounding community in many places.

This is where a community impact survey may benefit this mutuality of interest. It helps the community determine whether it gains economically, educationally, socially, and technologically by having a college or university in its midst. Furthermore, a survey of this type usually reveals some interesting data concerning the "symbiotic" relationship that exists between a college and its community. In addition, impact studies can become a key reference in program planning and development. The underlying reason for conducting a community impact study should be to help foster a better relationship between the community and the college by a more realistic understanding of how each benefits the other. In times of a declining economy, impact inquiries can facilitate mutual understanding between a college and its community by helping a community determine the net value of the presence of a college or university.

What is a community impact study?

The purpose of community impact inquiries is exactly what the name implies--to measure the impact of a college on its community. As I have already implied it involves more than just the educational impact on the community; it also includes social, technical, economic, political and cultural influence. Almost every function a college performs from admitting students to scheduling commencement exercies, has important consequences for the local community. Colleges are similar in many respects to large corporations. They own real estate, purchase supplies, hire personnel, use local banks, buy insurance and require public utilities and services. Since

the college is a consumer of goods and services, it can have a tremendous impact on the community. The degree of impact will vary with the size of the school, the size of the community and the amount of goods and services locally purchased.

On the other hand the community can serve the college in a number of ways too. Local governments and businesses can provide a valuable function in pre-service training for university students. Local citizens and groups can assist faculty with research projects. Oftentimes, the community provides the college with both economic and in-kind support through a variety of ways. By undertaking a community impact survey the college not only can determine its effect on the community but can collect valuable data about current needs and future programs to be undertaken.

How do you conduct a community impact study?

A valuable resource for conducting a community impact survey was published in 1978 by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS): Conducting Community College Impact Studies: A Handbook for Community Colleges, by Armijo, Micek and Cooper. The purpose of this publication is to provide a set of basic guidelines that can be used by community colleges for organizing and conducting community impact studies. Even though the Handbook describes specific procedures and instruments for conducting an impact study, it is recommended that each institution modify these to meet its own needs.

Because of increased public demands for institutional accountability, it is now more important than ever for colleges to assess their impacts. As Armijo, et. al., 1978 point out, these impacts can be:

* Economic (affecting institutional expenditures, changes in income standards of living, access, mobility, and job security).
* Educational (affecting development of new skills and competencies).
* Social (causing changes in family, recreational, or cultural activities).
* Technological (affecting technical developments, synthesis and reformulations of knowledge, and so on).

Although the elements of community impact may vary, a college probably will want to investigate the awareness and use of its programs and services, the extent to which they meet the needs of the community, and the existence of any unmet needs. Furthermore, a college should assess its direct as well as indirect impacts.

The Handbook provides complete "how-to-do-it" sections which any competent researcher can follow and understand. It presents a generalized approach designed to enable almost any institution to conduct a useful community impact survey for itself with a reasonable investment of resources. The manual makes recommendations for the definition of the en-

vironment to be studied, a description of the groups to be surveyed, and examples of survey instruments. The budget, as it often does, will probably determine the depth of the study and will dictate parameters. However, the Handbook will assist the researcher and the administration in making these decisions.

Using impact studies for program planning and development.

During the course of inquiries such as community impact studies the college or university is usually able to amass a large amount of data in terms of general figures. If comparative data are available, the college is able to identify trends and/or changes in areas of impact. Data such as this form the basis for planning and development of future programs for the institution. Now I'll admit this is not a simple task, nor are implications for planning obvious to the casual reviewer of an impact study. But there are identifiable data which have implications for program planning and development.

In addition, during inquiries such as these the college will receive some input from citizens about programs offered or desired by the community. Here is where the researcher may be called on to either conduct such a study or participate with the research staff in collecting, analyzing and reporting on the study. A part of the reporting document could easily address implications for program planning and development.

Only when a college or university recognizes and attempts to understand its effect upon the local community can it begin

to initiate steps for facilitating interaction, forming the basis for program planning and development. The goal should always be to make the college-community relationship a positive and harmonious one.

In conclusion let me say that community impact studies can be beneficial to the college or university in a number of ways, especially in times of a declining economy when the public may view an institution of higher education with severe scrutiny. Such a study not only helps to foster a better relationship between the college and the community, but the public can have a more realistic understanding of how each benefits the other. A second aspect is also most important. The data obtained from the economic impact study, along with other information collected about the college, can then be reviewed in planning for the future of the institution.

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